"Sustainable water management explained by the Sustainable Development Goals: Terms of reference and implementation»

René Longet
Expert in sustainable development, Vice-President SIG

Preamble

On July 29, 2010, based in particular on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and subsequent international commitments in terms of sustainability, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 64/292. It "recognizes that the right to safe drinking water and sanitation is a human right, essential for the full enjoyment of life and the exercise of all human rights".

I.- The SDGs and the 2030 Agenda

In 1987, the UN defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs". In the definition of needs, one starts from "the essential needs of the most deprived". It is important to remember this definition to properly integrate the holistic and systemic nature of sustainability, which is too often reduced to environmental issues.

It is about preserving and equitably distributing the basic resources of existence, keeping our Earth viable and livable, the common heritage of humanity. Which is far from certain. It is the humanism of modern times, an elementary ethic. The alternative to sustainability is simply non-sustainability, a world in which life would become increasingly constrained.

The notion of sustainability thus combines two basic components that are interrelated: equity in access to resources and their conservation. It aims to respond to both the socio-economic emergency and the environmental emergency, by promoting a conception of development that adds ecological, social and economic benefits. One of its references is the aforementioned International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

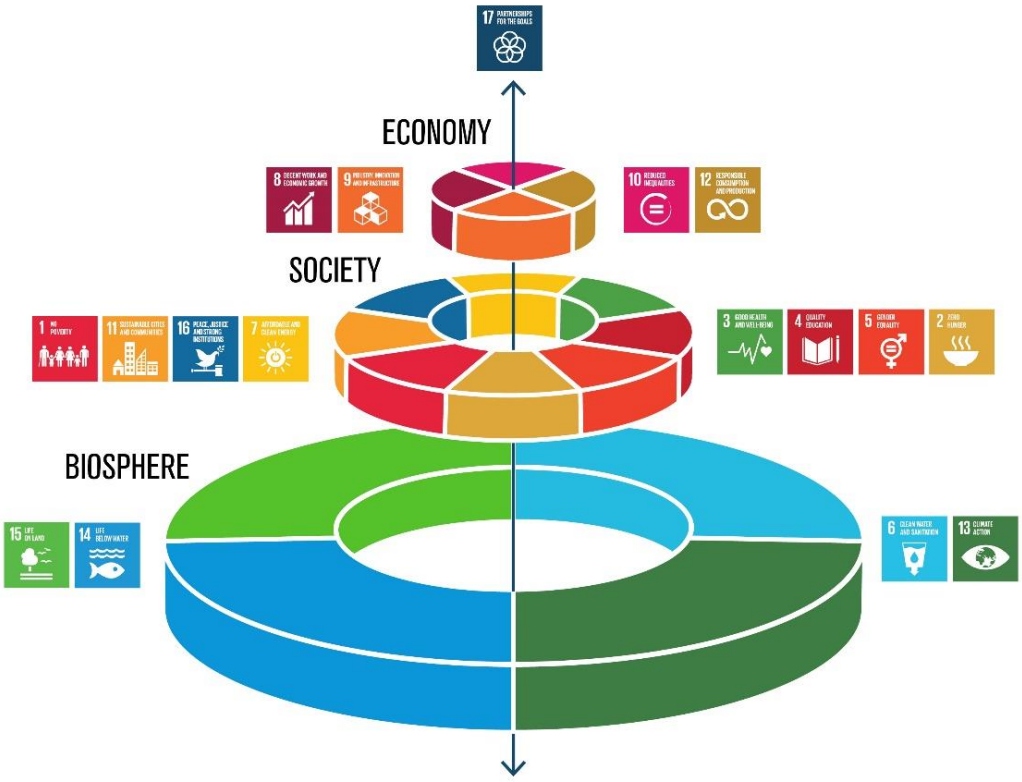
Adopted at the end of September 2015 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, the 2030 Agenda provides a faithful synthesis of 30 years of international commitments on sustainability - including the right to water, and which were beginning to constitute a corpus as dense as difficult to grasp in its various components (conventions, declarations, programs of action, etc.). It also shows its relevance and coherence.

Half of the 38 pages of this document, valid for the period 2016-2030, is made up of the list of 17 SDGs and their 169 targets. These 17 SDGs, often quoted today, are in fact so many chapter headings; it is the 169 targets that detail the content. Each target is important, but "integrated and inseparable", they form a whole and must be understood as so many elements of this whole and therefore in their interrelationships.
The SDG system thus provides a common language allowing the various actors to pull together on one same string, to share the same objectives. A tool for making actions

consistent, it provides the guarantee of not forgetting anything important, and constitutes a good communication vehicule.

Its representation increasingly takes the form of a pyramid, or a so called “wedding cake” whose base is made up of the capacities of natural systems to provide resources and digest our waste and pollution, and the middle floor of basic human needs (where we find again the economic, social and cultural rights already mentioned).

At the top are the tools to be oriented according to the two previous levels, crowned by SDG 17: partnership - because we can only achieve this together. The economy is thus defined as being at the service of society and having to stay inside of the possibilities of the biosphere - whereas currently it is too often the opposite.



Source[1]

II.- The response of the SDGs

We find again the right to water in SDG 6, inserted in the more global context of the good management of the resource.

Sustainable Development Goal 6: “**Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”.**

Targets

[1] The SDGs « Wedding cake ». Azote Images for Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University, 2016,

6.1 By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all

6.2 By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations

6.3 By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally

6.4 By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity

6.5 By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate

6.6 By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes

6.A By 2030, expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies

6.B Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management

In a few paragraphs are thus summarized the essential measures to be taken to ensure both equitable access to water, the basis of life, and its preservation, while highlighting some elements of its good governance.

Moreover, given the vital challenge that water represents (reminder: our body is made up of 2/3 water), no other objective of the 2030 Agenda can be achieved without the availability of this resource (employment, agriculture and food, health, sustainable development of rural and urban territories, fight against inequalities, climate change, equal rights between men and women, governance, partnership, etc.). Water is thus a major cross-cutting subject.

Overall, we can conclude that the 2030 Agenda adequately explains the description of the right to water and its conditions of realization.

Its implementation

With regard to the 2030 Agenda, the United Nations have put in place a monitoring, based both on “Voluntary National Reviews” during the annual meetings of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, and on statistical monitoring. This results in particular in the annual UN Report on the Sustainable Development Goals. The 2021 edition, relating to the 2020 figures, presents, in this case on SDG 6, a contrasting and overall not very encouraging picture:

The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021 p. 38-39

“Between 2015 and 2020, the proportion of the global population using safely managed drinking water services increased from 70.2 per cent to 74.3 per cent, with the largest numbers of people gaining access in Central and Southern Asia.
Despite this progress, another 2 billion people still lacked safely managed drinking water in 2020, including 771 million who were without even basic drinking water. Half of those lacking basic drinking water services (387 million) live in sub-Saharan Africa.

The proportion of the global population using safely managed sanitation services increased from 47.1 per cent in 2015 to 54 per cent in 2020. However, 3.6 billion people still lacked safely managed sanitation in 2020, including 1.7 billion who were without even basic sanitation. Of these people, 494 million practised open defecation, down from 739 million in 2015.

While the world is on track to eliminate open defecation by 2030, achieving universal access to safely managed sanitation by 2030 will require a quadrupling of current rates of progress. The proportion of the global population with basic hygiene rose from 67.3 per cent in 2015 to 70.7 per cent in 2020. This means that, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2.3 billion people worldwide (one in three) still lacked a basic handwashing facility with soap and water at home, and 670 million had no handwashing facility at all. (...)

When a country or territory withdraws 25 per cent or more of its renewable freshwater resources, it is water stressed. This challenge affects countries on every continent. In 2018, 2.3 billion people lived in water-stressed countries, of whom 721 million lived in countries with high or critical levels. Between 2015 and 2018, water stress in some subregions with already high or very high levels, such as Northern Africa, Central Asia and Western Asia, increased by over 2 per cent. Improving water-use efficiency is one key to reducing water stress. (...)

Between 1970 and 2015, inland and marine/coastal wetlands each shrank by approximately 35 per cent, three times the rate of forest loss. (...) 129 countries are not on track to achieve sustainable management of water resources by 2030”.

III.- Standing firm in an uncertain world

Regardless of the state of its implementation, the SDG system is valuable as a frame of reference and a common language between actors; it has often been described as "light in the night", "landmark in the fog". Regarding the achievement of the agreed targets, the UN (like many other actors) stresses that it is not living up to the commitments made. International frameworks provide valuable impetus, but it absolutely needs to be relayed by the actors. In other words, we know what is to be done but we hardly do it...

On this subject, it is clear that the geopolitical situation has deteriorated considerably since 2015. The multilateral systems, without which no global and coherent solution can be found to the challenges of sustainability, are weakened by the rise of authoritarian regimes which seek to divert them to their advantage and populist movements that are not in favor of them.

The affirmation of the universality of human rights and the need to move towards a common, prudent and equitable management of resources are thus supplanted by the revival of aggressive nationalism and, instead of a global negotiation on how to preserve and distribute the vital resources, we see so many means of pressure and power, increasing the likelihood of conflicts.

The Covid-19 pandemic, both through health measures (without which the number of victims would have been much higher than the approximately 5.5 million officially recorded deaths) and through the effects of the disease itself, has caused a significant decline in economic and social development, in terms of access to education and employment in particular.

For the first time since a long time, absolute poverty (less than $1.9/day) and undernutrition increased, in both cases by around 120 million people. Secondly, the fierce and acerbic criticism of health measures has obscured in part of the opinion the other global and local issues and in particular those related to sustainability, developing negativity and mistrust towards the findings of science and decision-makers.

We will need to redouble our efforts to redirect things in the right direction, that one indicated by the 2030 Agenda, its 17 sustainability goals and its 169 targets to which the Member States of the United Nations subscribed in 2015. The issues hereafter will be decisive.

Issues of knowledge and perception: stop harboring the illusion that nature will always be resilient and its ecosystem services always available. It is a question of relearning that the resources on which our existence is based must be managed with caution, with respect for the common good and all legitimate interests, by closely monitoring the evolution of situations and load capacities of natural systems, in short, medium and long term.
Governance issues: the basic resources must be supervised in their management by the public authorities, under their direct or community management and/or concessions delimited by their durations and conditions. Pricing must both ensure equity in access to the resource and its economical and responsible use.

Technical issues: good governance of natural resources can only be territorial (catchment basin) and holistic, unifying all aspects under a single view. It must also be based on the most efficient techniques within reach of the population.

Legal issues: the question of the legal personality given to nature, or to some of its constituents, is now raised and recalls the common nature of the resource on which all

depend, and the respect due to it. The fact remains that its defense will fall to humans, in a careful and positive weighing of interests.

Economic and social challenges: the implementation of sustainability will only be welcomed if, as is the commitment of the 2030 Agenda, it creates "decent" jobs, and does not increase social inequalities but on the contrary manages to reduce them.

Our future depends on how we manage our relationship with our natural support: what we do to nature we actually do to ourselves. The key is the alliance between a committed civil society, honest and efficient public authorities, and responsible users.

Bibliography

Fiechter-Widemann E., Human Right to Water: Justice or ... Sham?, The Legal, Philosophical and Theological Background of the New Human Right to Water, Slatkine, Geneva 2017.
Girardin B, Fiechter-Widemann E., (Ed.), Blue Ethics, Ethical Perspetives on Sustainable, Fair Water Resources Use and Management, Ethics Praxis 13, Geneva 2020 (https://www.globethics.net/praxis-series).
Golay C., The Right to Water, Center Europe-Tiers Monde [RLI], Cahier critique n° 6, Geneva 2009.
Longet R., Un plan de survie de l'humanité, les Objectifs du développement durable, Jouvence, Geneva 2020 [RL2].
United Nations, "2021 Sustainable Development Goals Report", New York 2021.